DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 239 EC 304 504

AUTHOR Silvester, Timothy
TITLE Managing a Bilingual Programme (BSL and English) in a School for Deaf Children.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the International Congress on Education of the Deaf (18th, Tel Aviv, Israel, July 16-20, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education Programs; *Bilingual Schools; *Deafness; Elementary Secondary Education; English; Foreign Countries; Language of Instruction; *Program Development; Program Evaluation; Second Language Learning; *Sign Language; Special Schools; Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS British Sign Language; England

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the implementation of a bilingual education program teaching both British Sign Language (BSL) and English at a school serving 100 profoundly deaf elementary and secondary students and an additional 100 deaf students in the post-16 provision. The decision to adopt a bilingual approach is discussed, and while the approach was widely accepted by staff, in retrospect it was found that further staff consultation would have been appreciated. Early stages of implementation saw the bilingual program's introduction with the youngest group of children, with each new class included in the program until a full bilingual program had arisen, giving the secondary school added time to prepare for the change. Although intensive training was made available to all elementary level teachers, secondary training was limited to core subject teachers, and numerous problems arose in the pursuit of a faculty and staff with high levels of BSL fluency and competence. Difficulties in balancing the roles of English and BSL in the classroom and in the larger educational environment are discussed, and plans to improve upon the current state of the program are described. (PB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 390 239

MANAGING A BILINGUAL PROGRAMME

(BSL AND ENGLISH)

IN A SCHOOL FOR DEAF CHILDREN

Timothy Silvester

Principal, Royal School for the Deaf, Derby, England

Most deaf children in England are integrated into mainstream schools. A small number do attend special schools for the deaf. They are usually there because parents have chosen that school in preference to a mainstream setting. The Royal School for the Deaf in Derby is an independent school set up by a charity with 100 profoundly deaf pupils. A further 100 deaf students attend the post-16 provision, Derby College for Deaf People. The school is following a bilingual education approach and is working towards a target where deaf people form half of the child contact staff. There are some deaf teachers, including the Head of the Primary School, but most of the deaf staff are education assistants who work in the classroom alongside the teachers.

This paper is not specifically about the merits of a bilingual education but describes how the policy was implemented once the decision had been made. Despite some difficulties, which I will describe later in this paper, I do want to say that I am happy to continue with this approach. I believe that the children are more confident and self-assured and also they expect to be understood and expect to understand others. They become frustrated if these do not occur and have every right to be so. They are not content to be passive any more and pretend that they have understood.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
T. Silvester
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

EC304504

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

So how did this come about at the Royal School for the Deaf in Derby? For most of its 100 year history, the school has pursued an official policy of oralism. It has not adopted the rigid stance that many schools for the deaf adopted in denying children the use of Sign Language but that was not encouraged as the mode of communication in class time.

A decade or so ago a number of people felt that this official line was no longer acceptable as more and more children and staff were using some signs derived from British Sign Language as a way of ensuring that good communication took place. The Governors and senior management at the school wanted to ensure that a proper approach to communication was followed and advice was sought from a number of people. This culminated in the opening of the Communication Centre in 1987 and the employment of two deaf people to teach Sign Language to the children, parents, staff and other professionals associated with the school.

For a number of years, the school then followed a total communication approach as official policy, using Sign Supported English as the main method of communication by hearing adults.

Decision to Adopt A Bilingual Approach

The Communication Centre now became a focus for discussion about communication issues. Other professionals became involved and a view emerged that total communication was not after all the best way of working with deaf children. It was felt that a bilingual approach might be more appropriate. That was using British Sign Language and English as two separate, distinct languages. There was a recognition that BSL should be the first language for deaf children as it was accessible to them. There was also a recognition that deaf people could make a significant

contribution to the education of deaf children in establishing that first language. This would enable real access to the curriculum (delivered in BSL) and to establishing a base language from which to develop English as a second language. It was believed that you could gain access to English through BSL. Some members of the Board of Governors were involved with the Communication Centre and eventually a proposal was put to them that the school should officially adopt a bilingual approach and in 1990 the school embarked on this with a group of primary aged children.

While there was some consultation with the staff, in retrospect it is clear that it was not fully appreciated what the consequences of implementing this approach might be for existing children, future intake, existing staff, new staff and the training needs of all those concerned with the organisation. There was no real hostility to the idea of a bilingual approach but staff would have appreciated being more fully involved by a thorough discussion of the issues and what this would mean for them.

The discussions that take place in staff meetings now bear witness to the fact that there had not been full and informed debate and I would like to explain what I mean by giving some examples of this:

- a bilingual approach means that we have a school policy where all hearing staff must sign when deaf children or staff are present. However, there is still a problem of attitude with some teachers and assistants who will not grasp that we have changed, eg they still "talk" when deaf people are present and they are not at ease in using sign language in deaf/hearing company or with talking to hearing people in the presence of deaf people
- some hearing teachers and assistants will not accept that deaf children sometimes do not understand what they are saying. They do not feel they need a deaf person to explain

what has been said or to elicit more information from the children. However, when other staff need to be sure that a deaf child has understood them, and that they understand them, they often have a deaf colleague to reinforce and/or clarify what has been said

- some hearing staff have been at the school a long time and are resistant to change and find it difficult to immerse themselves in BSL. The attitude of this small group can slow down whole school progress.

If we had spent a long time debating all of the issues and all the implications, it would have significantly delayed the start of the initiative. So it was felt that it was better to start and gradually build up the approach learning as we go along and planning for the future at the same time. Unfortunately there is no agreed model of what a bilingual school should be and we have to adopt that method which seems most useful at the time to children we are teaching with the resources we have, which includes staffing.

By the time I arrived at the school the decision to implement a bilingual programme had been made and and the first group was already established.

The Early Stages

It was initially introduced with the youngest group of primary children. Each subsequent year the group of new arrivals were included in the programme until eventually a full primary bilingual department was created. This allowed the secondary school a few years to prepare for the change. It was recognised that we needed both deaf and hearing people to be involved as children should have access to natural Sign Language users as well as natural English users, and this was most likely to come from a combination of deaf and hearing people working together.

The first group of children had a deaf Teacher of the Deaf, and a hearing Assistant. But since deaf Teachers of the Deaf are all too rare, the remaining primary classes were staffed with a hearing Teacher and a deaf Assistant. The teacher was responsible for curriculum organisation and delivery, but the deaf assistant was often used to introduce new topics because of fluent BSL. The fact that the assistant had to be fluent in BSL initially overrode the requirement to have a Nursery Nurse qualification which is usual for an assistant working in a primary school.

The hearing teachers were expected to use BSL to their best ability and this was going to be the main language of communication within the classroom. Similarly, assemblies would be conducted in BSL. Teachers would have the use of the Communication Centre and it's staff to improve their skills. At other times, when English was being taught, they (hearing teachers) were obviously the main people responsible for this part of the curriculum delivery.

Using unqualified assistants has meant that while there was someone skilled in using BSL they were unfamiliar with educational procedures and curriculum organisation and delivery. There was also the question that they may have limited English ability. We have tried to ensure that unqualified deaf assistants have access to training, including English, but we have not given this the same emphasis as we have given to hearing people learning Sign Language. This is a major area for development in the school and is likely to be one of the main thrusts of our training programme for the coming academic year.

We have recognised the need for this because of the professionalism demonstrated by the two qualified assistants in the department who are deaf. They are both products of a course which was specifically for deaf students who wanted to become nursery nurses or education assistants.

The Secondary School

In the primary school, bilingualism was developed year by year, adding on one more class. Yet when it comes to transferring to secondary school the situation is vastly different. The children move from a class based to a subject based education and will be taught by 10 or 12 different teachers. Whilst we were able to offer intensive training to new teachers for primary classes we have not been able to offer that same intensity to all subject teachers to start to receive the bilingual children when they moved into secondary school. We have made a serious attempt to cover some of the subjects such as English, Science, History, R.E. and now maths, and we also have deaf people in other lessons, but we do not have a full bilingual secondary department.

Again there is no approved model of what a secondary bilingual department should be. Perhaps we should look at our college model where we have interpreters in the classroom and a hearing teacher delivering the subject. If this were to be the case we would be relying on the interpreter to deliver the curriculum and that person may not have the educational background or knowledge base we would expect of someone doing that job. There is also the added difficlty that if the teacher did not have a high level of skill in Signing how would they be able to monitor what the interpreter was delivering? Ideally all of the teachers should be as skilled as possible in Sign Language so that they can deliver their subject themselves. Although this would seem the most logical, we do have to deal with teachers who have been established here for some time and who may not be as adaptable or flexible as we would like in wanting to learn fluent Sign Language.

So, for the time being, we acknowledge a compromise situation.

Training

A major assumption from what I have said is that there is ready access to Sign Language training. Although this is the case generally in that we have a Communication Centre on site, and courses are available for up to stage three, a commitment is required to be successful. There is also a question of the quality of training. Many people do not find it easy to progress to a high level of competence in signing (eg. CACDP Stage III) and just as bilingualism is in its early stages in schools for the deaf, so too is teaching Sign Language, when compared with teaching other subjects. That too has some way to go as a teaching discipline:

- there are variations in standards throughout the UK
- it is usually not taught by 'teachers'
- many people who teach this do not have a traditional academic background
- many people who teach sign language are not used to curriculum planning, different methods of teaching and the appropriate use of encouragement and criticism

Achieving the high level of competence in BSL required to teach bilingually remains an issue and is likely to be so for some time.

Monitoring the Bilingual Approach

During the first year it was decided that it should be monitored and evaluated. A senior lecturer from the Open University was invited to carry this out as a research programme. This was organised to take place during the years 1992 and 1993 by two researchers, one deaf and one hearing, each looking at separate areas of children's development, BSL and English both receptive and expressive. We felt it was important to have some external view of how we were developing

and we have learnt much from their findings. The approach is still evolving, and we have some way to go before we feel we are happy with it. We were encouraged by what we were seeing with the development of the primary children but aware that there were areas where significant improvement was needed - eg. no formal assessment of BSL, no intervention strategies to improve it and no agreed whole school English programme.

Developing the Approach

We take children from the ages of 4 - 16, but in recent years have had very few young children. Some do come here at ages 6 or 7, but many children do not start at the school until they reach secondary age. Children come from all over the United Kingdom, and many authorities and parents are understandably reluctant to send very young children here in residence during their early years. For a child to be linguistically successful it is recognised that one language should be established early in its life and for profoundly deaf children this language could be British Sign Language. However, most deaf children are born of hearing parents, and do not have access to natural sign language from birth.

We are working with the Local Education Authority, Health Authority and Social Services to try and do something about this early language establishment and create a provision for newly diagnosed deaf children and those up to the age of 5 to provide access to a range of support and information, especially about communication, including bilingualism.

Current Situation

Children enter the school with a variety of backgrounds and language experiences and this does not make class grouping or teaching easy. Although BSL is the first language of most pupils, for

some older children their first language will be a form of English. They will have to learn BSL as a second language, yet that is the language we are saying is the main method of communication throughout the school. This is particularly so with children who join at secondary age and they then mix with those children who have come through the primary school and may have had four years in a bilingual department.

The school has an admissions policy and a language policy which tries to take account of this and recognises our obligation to a wide range of deaf children, but in practice it means that you cannot have one simple bilingual programme for everyone in the school.

In the early stages, there was a focus on developing BSL skills and it was easy to overlook the role that spoken English should play in the education of our children. When trying to follow a new approach like bilingualism there is a tendency to concentrate on BSL and for many years we have tried to improve the ability of all staff in that area. Perhaps we have not given as much attention to the listening and speaking skills of the children but this is because we have tried to give them access to a full and balanced curriculum through BSL. It may be that this is the first time that we have had a genuine opportunity to teach the children a full range of subjects because they have the language to cope with them.

Improvements needed

We need to be clearer about how we are implementing Hearing Aid and Spoken English Policies.

We are aware of many short-comings and have asked some consultants to look at what we are doing in both primary and secondary departments and advise and work with us. We need to be

able to assess the development of children's BSL, intervene to improve it and to account to external authorities that children are progressing in BSL. We need to have assistants who are trained as Education Assistants, trained in assessing BSL and also able to intervene to improve it.

We also need to consider the presentation of the curriculum which has been organised along traditional English lines. One researcher has suggested we need to structure it in BSL and not just use Sign Language to present a traditional curriculum.

We do recognise that English is likely to become more important as the children get older. External examinations are conducted in English and when they leave school they will need written English in their jobs or at college. We do have to re-think that balance and decide what emphasis we should give to English within the classroom. Should we limit it to English lessons or should History, Geography and Science also become areas where we try to improve spoken and received English, possibly at the expense of the subject content.

Conclusion

There is a staff commitment to the bilingual programme. They do see its value for the children and they do want to improve their skills as they recognise the improvements in the understanding and confidence of the children and that they are able to deliver a wider curriculum. They will continue to be enthusiastic but do need feedback and do need specific guidance on how the situation can be improved for themselves as well as for the children, as that is how we will have a more lasting effect.

We value the input of deaf people and in many areas, such as assemblies and telling stories, they appear more successful than hearing staff. They are able to explain and describe things in ways that hearing staff cannot achieve. They think and explain things immediately in visual not verbal ways.

Finally, bilingual education could have major implications for integration programmes and could turn the usual approach on its head. Most services for deaf children believe that children should be integrated into mainstream nurseries and infant schools as a matter of course. They consider that a special school may be needed as the difference in progress between deaf and hearing children seems visibly to widen at junior/secondary age. What would be more appropriate is to support deaf children in a bilingual nursery and infant provision with increasing access to, and emphasis on, English in the junior years to help the children become bilingual at secondary age. You could then have progressive integration into mainstream secondary classes as the children would have a better grasp of English and, with training to use interpreters, could have access to a wider curriculum. This is the way we work with students on courses at local colleges, and it would give me immense satisfaction to see this process start to operate in secondary school.